

PART I: SPECIAL TOPIC SESSION

Background

In July 1989, the NIC Community Corrections Division held a two-day Special Topic Session on women offenders under community supervision. The session's purpose was to enable NIC and other federal agencies to sharpen their understanding of the issue of women offenders in the community and their needs; such information is critical to future planning efforts of the Division. Community supervision was defined broadly to include women on probation and parole, in pre-release and work release centers, and in other specialized programs such as day treatment, drug treatment, and community residential facilities.

The increased interest of the Community Corrections Division in female offenders follows an NIC special focus on the topic, spearheaded by the Prisons Division in 1989. The Prisons Division devoted considerable resources to two projects: a study of objective classification for women offenders, and the development of a guide to programming for women in prison. In addition, NIC's National Academy of Corrections revised the curriculum for its Special Issue Seminar, "Working with Female Offenders," offering the one-week course in November 1989.

Session Goals and Tasks

The Community Corrections Division's Special Topic Session took the form of a focused, roundtable discussion among staff and invited participants. Participants included corrections practitioners, administrators, direct service providers, and researchers from local, state, and federal agencies, both public and private. The information provided by this highly knowledgeable and dedicated group of participants, together with that provided by respondents to a survey conducted by the Information Center, has been extremely valuable to the Division in identifying critical issues, emerging trends, and technical assistance and training needs of the community corrections field with regard to women under community supervision.

One of the first tasks of the session was to build a national picture of women offenders serving sentences in the community: what are their offenses and offender characteristics; what sentences do they receive and for how long; what programs are available; and what are the current needs?

Generally, we found that there is a serious lack of accurate and detailed information on women offenders on probation and parole and in other community programs. Both nationally and on the state level, participants had to rely on the more complete information on women in prison as a basis for attempting to paint a picture of community sentencing and supervision.

Participants agreed that, while there are probably more similarities than differences between the two populations in terms of offender characteristics, there are some notable differences. In general, women supervised in the community have committed less serious crimes, have less serious offense histories, and are younger than women in prison. Still, without better statistical and evaluative information of programs, it remains difficult to promote expanded attention and resources to women under community supervision.

Profile of Women Offenders

A general profile emerged from our discussion of the current picture of women offenders, again based largely on statistics on women in prison:

- Women commit fewer crimes than men and have different criminal involvement. Women are convicted mostly of property crimes (from 50 to 60 percent), including theft, forgery, fraud, and embezzlement; drug-related offenses; and impaired driving (DUI/DWI) offenses.
- In terms of offender characteristics:
 - The typical female probationer is a single parent with substance abuse problems, whose family responsibilities inhibit her employment opportunities.
 - Women offenders are poor, disproportionately black and Hispanic, undereducated, underemployed or on government assistance, and suffer from serious drug and alcohol addictions.

The women are, for the most part, single heads of household with an average of two children. Many have prior histories of physical and emotional abuse, and they have more health problems than male offenders. There appears to be an increase in dual diagnoses between addiction disorders and mental health problems.

Many participants characterized women offenders by their dependencies: on on abusive and dysfunctional relationships, on drugs and alcohol, and on government assistance.

Offender Needs

Session participants described a variety of approaches to street supervision and treatment/intervention programming for women. In describing these approaches, they also identified the greatest needs and challenges they face as program administrators and supervisors.

- **Drug treatment** - Almost without exception, the most critical need cited was the need to expand drug treatment slots for women, and to develop more effective drug treatment approaches which focus on how women are best motivated to change destructive drug habits. There was a real concern that traditional drug treatment programs are not dealing successfully with crack-cocaine addiction.
- **Critical support services** - As with other forms of treatment, women's ability to successfully complete drug treatment depends on the availability of other critical services. Chief among these are adequate child care, transportation, housing, and access to family and mental health counseling. Women offenders have more family responsibilities and greater economic difficulties than male offenders.
- **Housing** - Participants reported on the growing homelessness of women offenders. For a homeless, female probationer, compliance with treatment or supervision requirements is almost impossible when she is preoccupied with finding food and shelter for herself and her family. A specific aspect of the housing need is the need for transition centers for women released from prison on parole or pre-release status. This is a difficult time, when women need to acquire saleable job skills or find adequately-paying jobs to support themselves and their families through legal means.
- **Education and training** - Educational and vocational training programs need to be expanded for women offenders in order to move them toward economic self-sufficiency.
- **Empowerment** - Clearly one of the greatest needs is programs and program components that foster empowerment of women to take responsibility for their own lives. The session brought frequent testimony to the fact that empowerment is the key to successful treatment of women.

As we know, women bring multiple dependencies to the supervision and program setting. Dependencies can also be fostered by the programs themselves. As one residential facility director stated, women offenders do not want to be "rescued, studied, or saved from themselves." They do not want middle class values imposed on them. They may find a "let-me-take-care-of-you" attitude insulting. They want to learn the

skills that are necessary to take care of themselves and their families, even though developing self-sufficiency can be frightening.

- ***Counseling for physical and sexual abuse*** - A high proportion of women offenders have been abused physically and/or sexually, as children and often as adults with abusive partners. There is a need for effective counseling for abused women and for parenting skills programs to help them develop non-abusive relationships with their children.

Other Needs

What other themes and directions emerged from our discussions with practitioners?

- ***A continuum of sanctions and services*** - Participants discussed the need for a full range of sanctions and services for female offenders, particularly as direct sentencing options designed to meet women's different surveillance and service needs. The success of such options depends, in part, on the development of more accurate classification systems for women that will do a better job of assessing risk to the community and the complex service needs they present.
- ***Better information*** - To develop an effective continuum of supervision strategies and treatment programs in the community, much background work needs to be done. The serious gaps in information on women offenders under community supervision present a challenge that can be addressed. Our limited statistics do identify growing numbers, suggesting that we can no longer use the excuse that "there aren't enough female offenders for a program." Improved statistics could help combat the perception that the numbers are "too few to count" and the problems too small to warrant special attention and additional resources.

The lack of good statistics, however, is only part of the picture. Participants noted that there is an equally strong need for qualitative research focused on understanding the details, complexities, and motivations of women under supervision. This information would contribute to the design of more effective program responses.

- ***Training of staff on women offender issues*** - Women on probation and parole are overwhelmingly supervised on mixed-gender caseloads. Participants emphasized the tremendous need for effective training on gender, race, and cultural issues to enable all community corrections professionals to work more effectively with women. Staff need to better understand who the women under their supervision are and to recognize

their real-life circumstances and dependencies. This understanding would directly affect how women offenders do on street supervision and in treatment programs.

- ***Innovative programs*** - Women are largely left out of the current experimentation with intermediate sanctions. We all need to ask, "How would these new approaches be designed for women?"

NIC Directions

The NIC Community Corrections Division has the rather large task of sorting through the suggestions presented in the session and choosing future program directions. With its limited resources, it cannot respond to all of the needs identified. The current Division initiative, under the 1990 Program Plan, is designed to:

- 1) identify emerging issues in responding to female offenders in the community;
- 2) identify and provide a descriptive analysis of strategies or programs that appear to provide effective supervision or treatment; and
- 3) develop a recommended approach for states to use in conducting a systemwide assessment of female offenders' special needs, incorporating the experiences of states that have conducted such studies.

Conclusion

Women are part of the rapidly increasing offender population in community corrections. In the broader context of agencies straining to provide even minimal supervision and expand slots in a wide variety of treatment programs, it is no wonder that it has been difficult to draw attention to the special circumstances and needs of women offenders.

Of course, many agencies have focused special attention on women on probation, parole, and in community programs. These agencies' interest and the dedication of professionals such as those who attended the Special Topic Session are providing valuable guidance to the NIC Community Corrections Division as it plans its future assistance programs. Clearly, NIC can contribute by helping to build a network of knowledgeable professionals working to focus attention and resources on the legitimate needs of women offenders in the community. ■

NIC FOCUS: WOMEN OFFENDERS IN THE COMMUNITY

PART II: INFORMATION CENTER SURVEY

To support the NIC Community Corrections Division's Special Topic Session, the Information Center conducted a survey on female offenders supervised in the community and on the special programs provided by community corrections agencies to meet the needs of their female clients. Seventy surveys were sent to state and local probation, parole, and community corrections administrators nationwide. The number returned was thirty-six, a response rate of 51 percent.

Because of the differences in the structure of community corrections agencies among the states, it is inappropriate to report survey results in statistical terms. For example, while one response may represent an entire state's community corrections agency, another response may represent only a single county's probation agency. Therefore, the summary below is intended only to provide a general picture of administrators' views of changes in the characteristics of female offenders being supervised in the community and to note some of the ways community corrections agencies are responding to this growing segment of their populations.

Data: The Female Offender in the Community

Females as a Proportion of Total Caseload

Surprisingly, a number of agencies' statistics do not include a breakdown by gender. Among those agencies that keep these records, however, females represent between 6 and 20 percent of total caseloads. This wide variance can be attributed, in part, to the different types of responding agencies--which include state level probation/parole, state parole, state and local community corrections, and local probation agencies.

Although it is impossible to specify the types of agency caseloads that include larger proportions of women, in general, probation and community corrections agencies tended to report higher proportional representations of female clients than did parole agencies.

All respondents indicated that their agencies do **not** supervise female offenders differently from male offenders.

Changes in Numbers and Characteristics of Female Offenders

The survey asked respondents to describe, based on their own experiences, changes in the numbers and socio-economic characteristics of female offenders since 1980. Following is a summary of their comments.

- **Increased numbers** - Respondents generally remarked on significant increases over recent years in the number of women in community corrections populations. In **Ohio**, for example, the supervised female population has doubled in the last ten years, primarily because of property offenses. An **Arizona** administrator, in commenting on the state's prison population, noted that females constitute a growing proportion of inmates. From 1973 to 1978, females represented 5.8 percent of inmates; from 1984 to 1988, 7.1 percent of inmates were female.
- **Similar socio-economic characteristics** - A recurring theme in the survey responses is the fact that many female offenders have poor employment histories. More women than men are welfare offenders, and of those who have worked at all, most have held only minimum-wage jobs. Some respondents also cited inadequate formal education among women clients, although others commented that the female community corrections population tends to be relatively well-educated compared to those in prison.
- **Increased treatment needs** - Treatment needs of women clients are increasing, in part because of the growing number of drug-dependent offenders. A **Wisconsin** respondent also noted that adequate medical care is difficult to obtain, especially for serious gynecological problems.
- **More violent offenses** - Although most female offenders continue to be convicted of property crimes, a number of respondents cited increases in violent crimes committed by women. A **Michigan** respondent commented that women involved in violent offenses tend, as in the past, to be accomplices. On the other hand, another respondent noted that more women are being arrested as the sole perpetrator of a crime rather than in the past, as a co-defendant with a man.

A **Missouri** administrator commented that fewer female clients are under supervision simply for welfare fraud, and that the charge now is frequently accompanied by conviction for child abuse. And a New **Jersey** parole administrator's view is that "the female offender of the late 1980s is more aggressive, violent, and mentally disturbed than her counterpart of the late 1970s. . . . The increasing number of violent female offenders may be due to cultural changes and the deinstitutionalization of many patients from the state mental hospitals."

- **Increased substance abuse** - There was a general consensus among respondents that substance abuse has increased among women offenders. Many respondents cited the growing numbers of women clients who have been convicted of drug-related offenses in the last eight years.

Others noted that it is not the rate of substance abuse that has changed in recent years, but the types of drugs involved. A New **York** parole administrator commented on the fact that female parolees are younger and that the proliferation of crack in the communities served by the agency “has had a greater impact on our work than any other single factor.” And from a **South Carolina** administrator: “It appears as though substance abuse among our clients may be as high as 80 to 85 percent of our caseloads.”

- **More traffic offenses** - In addition to commenting on the growing number of female clients involved in violent crimes and substance abuse, administrators noted increases in convictions for serious traffic offenses, including DWI/DUI, among women. In **Georgia**, for example, cases in the categories of Habitual Traffic Offender and Driving Under the Influence have nearly tripled since 1978 as a proportion of total probation admissions.

Classification Systems

Most responding agencies use the same classification system for women as for men. Only **Delaware**, the **Michigan** paroling agency, **Nebraska**, **New York**, the **Ohio** Bureau of Community Service, and **West Virginia** indicated that they use classification systems specifically designed for female offenders.

Some respondents expressed problems with the classification system presently being used by their agencies. A few noted that although in the past female offenders tended to present a lower risk score than males, this discrepancy may be reduced as females’ offense patterns change.

Several others commented that women generally have greater needs for service than men and that current classification systems do not take these needs into account. Nor are services to address these difficulties easy to obtain. Examples of the special needs cited include:

- problems in dealing with substance abuse in relation to other family members’ substance abuse;
- spouse abuse;
- special medical problems; and
- the need for adequate child care.

Some respondents noted that, because of these needs, women tend to place a heavier workload burden on caseworkers than do males presenting comparable risks.

Validation of Classification Systems Used for Females

Respondents from several states indicated that their classification systems have been validated specifically for women or that their agencies have on some other basis determined that their systems are appropriate for females. These agencies include:

Georgia - Probation agencies use a risk/needs assessment that has been validated for both males and females. The weakness of the system, according to the respondent from Georgia, is that it could easily ignore “special circumstances” relevant only for female offenders.

Illinois - A recent validation study by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency of the probation agency’s classification system concludes that “the scale is not racially or sexually biased” and that the “instrument performs similarly for all subgroups analyzed.”

Louisiana - The Louisiana Commission on Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice is currently evaluating the state’s classification system.

Massachusetts - The Office of the Commissioner of Probation constantly re-evaluates its risk/needs classification system. In general, the system has been found very appropriate for female offenders. The agency recently has begun to evaluate the system’s employment/education indices in light of the special needs of female offenders.

Montana-The Community Corrections Bureau uses the Wisconsin model, which has been validated elsewhere, but not in Montana. Weaknesses in the system include its relative inability to take into account parental demands, traditional employment opportunities for women, and treatment issues.

New York -The New York State Division of Parole uses a differential supervision process for all parolees. The Division is currently piloting a risk-based case management system that classifies women differently from men and is free of gender bias. If the pilot is successful, the system will be expanded statewide.

Tennessee - The Division of Community Corrections uses the same system for male and female offenders. It has been validated for females.

Wisconsin - The Wisconsin Bureau of Community Corrections uses a risk/needs classification system that has been validated for all clients, though not specifically for females.

Community Programs for Women Offenders

Survey responses indicate that many agencies responsible for community corrections provide special programs for their female clients. Following is a summary of the information these agencies provided. Although not exhaustive, the descriptions indicate the range and degree of attention currently being given to female offenders by community corrections agencies nationwide.

(For additional information on agency responses to the survey, please contact the NIC Information Center, 1790 30th Street, Suite 130, Boulder, Colorado, 80301.)

Overview of Agency Programs

- **Arizona** runs a residential halfway house for women.
- In connection with a major initiative addressing prison crowding, **Delaware** received funding from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation to develop alternatives to prison for female offenders. This support resulted in the creation of more halfway house beds for women, an intensive supervision program, and a house arrest program. These programs are set aside for women but are not designed differently than those for male offenders.
- **Georgia** operates several programs for women. One of the state's seventeen diversion centers is provided exclusively for female offenders; bedspace at another also is reserved for women. Another diversion center operates a special out-patient day program for female probationers. The state also is building a detention center for women.
- **Iowa's** Fort Des Moines Women's Residential Facility functions as an alternative to incarceration, providing services for eighteen residents. The facility emphasizes external treatment programming and uses extensive community resources and services.
- A **Louisiana** respondent indicated that although women offenders generally have access only to the same treatment centers as men, larger communities in the state also provide special programs in rape crisis and wife abuse.
- In **Massachusetts**, there has been an emphasis on training staff to deal with female offenders. A variety of staff development programs has been offered, at which probation officers are introduced to community resources that address the needs of women offenders.
- Women released to halfway house programs in large metropolitan areas in **Michigan** are sent to facilities reserved for female offenders.

- Among states responding to the survey, **Minnesota** is perhaps the most active in providing programs for female offenders supervised in the community. Its programs include:
 - Reentry Services, Inc., for Women, a community-based residential program. Among other services, it provides training in independent living and parenting skills, a support system in the community to provide specialized services to women and their children, special groups focused on women's problems, and long-term housing options when releasees return to the community.
 - Genesis II for Women, a day treatment program for women and their children in Minneapolis. It operates a criminal justice project for women involved in the court system, which provides support to "aid women in establishing a self-sufficient, law abiding lifestyle." Genesis also has a maternal guidance program that serves women who are involved in the child protection system because of child abuse or neglect. Its goal is "to insure the care and safety of the children by improving the parenting abilities and independent living skills of the mothers."

Other Minnesota programs for women include:

- Hidden Ranch, a residential program for women in Minneapolis;
 - Women Helping Offenders, Inc., a nonresidential program also in Minneapolis; and
 - Grace, a program based in Duluth that provides social skills training and a battered women's shelter. Grace also provides intensive supervision and community service for women as alternatives to jail.
- The **Missouri** Board of Probation and Parole has developed a special referral resource for female offenders.
 - In **Nebraska**, the following special programs are provided for women:
 - a halfway house at the Lincoln Indian Center;
 - the North Omaha Alcohol Counseling Program, which provides day care, daily counseling, and a parenting skills class; and
 - support from the Alice Wilson Group, which provides money for clothing and transportation for women being released to the community, and tapes videos for family members to send to incarcerated women.
 - The **New York** Division of Parole contracts for a special Parole Resource Center to provide temporary residential support for newly-released female parolees in New York City. In addition, special transition facilities provide alternatives to reimprisonment for parolees

who have violated the conditions of their release. Specialized services for women with AIDS are provided through the Women and AIDS Resource Network. Many other special services are accessed through referrals.

- Two **Ohio** agencies provide programs for women offenders:
 - The Ohio Adult Parole Authority has developed a furlough program that enables women to work on a home rehabilitation project in Lima, Ohio. The furloughees live in a halfway house and work during the day. In addition to being paid a very minimal wage, the women learn skills that will benefit them upon release. The program, which has received national attention, is ongoing.
 - The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction's CRISP program at the state women's reformatory enables staff to work with female offenders upon their entrance into the prison system, to plan for their release. The program is designed for the less serious felony offender, and it helps women qualify for community release programs under shock probation, furlough, and parole. CRISP provides a vital link for placing female offenders in community residential centers and has increased the number of women offenders being released under shock probation and furlough.
- **South Carolina** has developed a separate shock probation program for women.
- **In Washington**, the Ratcliff House work/training release facility accommodates primarily females on work release, with room for seven pre-release residents. The facility provides educational and vocational programs, an orientation to community resources, parenting/family classes, an ex-offender group, and classes on personal wellness and health issues. Many of the classes are required. In addition, Pioneer Industries offers residents on-the-job training in high-skill areas such as metal prefabrication and machinist technology. Employment assistance is offered through community resources.
- **Wisconsin** provides a number of programs for women, including several focused on substance abuse:
 - NuStart, a transitional living facility in Milwaukee, emphasizing substance abuse treatment;
 - Ascent, a day treatment program, also in Milwaukee;
 - Passages, a four-phase drug treatment program for chemically-dependent women; and

- a support group in Milwaukee for women at risk for AIDS, including prostitutes and intravenous drug users.

Conclusion

Although in community corrections as in prisons, women continue to receive fewer resources than men, results of this survey indicate that community corrections administrators are beginning to consider and respond to the unique needs of their female clients.

As the preceding discussion of NIC's Special Topic Session on female offenders makes clear, however, a great deal more information, especially hard statistical data, is needed in order to broaden understanding of this area. NIC's initial efforts in this direction are intended, eventually, to lead to more effective programs for these offenders. ■

NIC and Parole Decisionmaking . . .

Recognizing the importance of parole decisionmaking, the NIC Community Corrections Division has been engaged in an effort to acquaint new parole board members with their role. A thirty-six-hour seminar offered through the National Academy of Corrections, "Orientation for New Parole Board Members," addresses a range of issues and provides an opportunity for new board members to interact with each other and with persons who have more experience in parole decisionmaking. This seminar will be offered June 24 – 29, 1990. For a more complete description, see page 23.

Because of their leadership position, parole board chairs have a special interest in ensuring that their states' decisionmaking processes are sound. Attendance at the most recent offering of the orientation demonstrated that interest, as the twenty-five chairs who attended represented a large proportion of the thirty-eight states with active parole boards.